

Can a new president succeed after damaging remarks are informally shared? (essay)

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Respect the People, Respect the Place

Can a new institutional leader succeed after making damaging remarks that are informally shared? Barbara McFadden Allen, Ruth Watkins and Robin Kaler investigate.

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Shortly after President Lavada arrived at a college, one of her key team members -- Scott, also new on the campus -- attended a social gathering hosted by his new academic department. It was a large, prominent department with a strong social culture; many faculty members, chairs and deans were present.

Throughout the evening, the president's team member spoke about actions the president planned to take, many of them very specific and not within the typical presidential portfolio. Some of his comments: "Lavada's going to shut down the languages and literatures department," and "Lavada thinks the geography program here is very weak."

Needless to say, everyone within earshot was astonished that, within a few weeks of arriving on the campus and with no apparent consultation with any of the implicated units, Lavada had formed such clear views and action plans. Also needless to say, those tidbits of Lavada's plans -- whether or not they accurately reflected her ideas -- circulated immediately and extensively. What's more, they launched the beginning of the end of any hope for a successful partnership between Lavada and the people at the university who had been deeply invested in its success over a number of decades.

As a new leader, you will want to be thoughtful about when, where, how and with whom you share your informal ideas, considering carefully how damaging such remarks might be.

Can Lavada Succeed in This Leadership Role?

Yes, if ...

She can build trust with key administrators and faculty members, establish that she understands her role as president, and function in a manner that reveals her aim to support campus leaders -- provost, deans and chairs -- in their roles rather than try to do their jobs.

It's unclear what led to the situation described above, whether it's a key staff member gone awry or it is in fact Lavada's misstep. From a practical standpoint, however, it doesn't much matter. Everyone who heard Scott's comments, or who hears them second- or thirdhand, assumes that they've heard the presidential agenda.

One hopes that someone at the gathering will alert Lavada to this conversation. For her to have a chance to succeed in her new leadership role, she will need to establish real boundaries for Scott, who has significantly undermined her with casual, thoughtless comments at an event he probably should not have attended. It may be an indication that Scott does not deserve the trust she has placed in him.

Perhaps most vital, Lavada will need to communicate with the provost and other people across the university, through her actions and her rhetoric, that she understands her role as a visible external leader of the institution -- with donors and legislators, as well as in the national higher education leadership discussion. Like many presidents, Lavada has a long record of success as a senior academic administrator, first as a chair, then as a dean and finally as a provost. She now needs to use that accumulated knowledge in new ways: not to replicate the duties of academic leaders but to empower them, represent them and secure resources, support and visibility that allow the university to succeed.

Lavada will want to reassure those people who are responsible for day-to-day academic operations, program quality and performance that she wants to partner with academic leaders in setting goals and establishing performance indicators. But, at the same time, she must communicate that she recognizes that strategies to achieve shared goals are the responsibility of those academic leaders and that she will trust and empower them to do their jobs -- rather than interfere with their efforts.

If Lavada can address and remedy the challenges with Scott, build relationships of trust with academic leadership and do the job she's been recruited to rather than revert to the roles she knows well from her past successes, she may recover from this early misstep toward an effective presidency that respects and strengthens the institution she's joined.

No, if ...

Lavada and Scott appear to have intentionally spread doubt, fear and discord. That may be a useful short-term strategy if the objective is to create tension and generate anxiety that can actually drive change. But it is difficult to see how they can use this strategy to effect positive, sustainable improvements.

It is possible that Lavada and Scott are motivated by their own anxiety about pressures from, for example, the Board of Trustees or other stakeholders. But it is the leader's responsibility to interpret and communicate external pressures for the university community, including the faculty, in a way that inspires. Fear and anxiety have a poor record of success as tools for positive, long-term institutional change.

The problems here are manifold:

- Scott should have attended the event only as a member of the hosting department -- not as a representative of the president.
- Whether true or not, Scott's comments give the impression that the president sanctioned the remarks.
- Everyone who was within earshot of these comments will now be suspicious of the president.
- Rumors will spread quickly, generating negative energy among the faculty and academic leadership. The end result is that Lavada and Scott may get a short-term gain at the expense of developing the trust and confidence that will be required if they are to enact significant institutional change.

In a nutshell: If you are part of a good institution, it already has many talented, highly accomplished people, as well as a strong history and a promising future. It's not your job to save your institution. It is your job to facilitate continued success in partnership with the people and the place. Think carefully about what may seem like innocuous, informal remarks: everything you say matters. Treat your colleagues with respect and be generous in sharing success with everyone who plays a role in achieving the institution's goals. As the institution's leader, it is your responsibility to articulate direction and vision in a way that inspires constructive action.

Bio

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